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Francis Bruguiere

HELEN FREEMAN AS "HANNAH" IN *JOHN FERGUSON*

“John Ferguson,” A Remarkable Play

By KATHARINE WRIGHT

LATE in the season and with no flourish of trumpets, originally billed for only one week, the season's finest play was produced at the Garrick Theatre by the Theatre Guild. As a production, *John Ferguson* is a worthy successor to the high art displayed by Jacques Copeau in his season at the same theatre. The poignant spirit of its acting carries on the best traditions of Lady Gregory's Irish Players. Another point of similitude with the work of the company from the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, is the comparative inexperience of those in the cast, for with the exception of Augustin Duncan and Dudley Digges, both seasoned actors, the other players have had little training in the theatre.

St. John Ervine, the author, son of a workman in the Belfast shipyards, first became known through his novels and short stories of Irish peasant life. In Europe his work as a dramatist has long been admired, and when the Abbey Theatre Players came to America, two of his plays, *Mixed Marriage* and *The Magnanimous Lover* were in the repertoire.

The charm of *John Ferguson* lies in its reality. It is not merely a play. It is life itself. There are two dominating figures, a coward and a fanatic. These two are absolute creations. James Caesar is as despicable in his cowardice as Giannetto in Sem Benelli's *The Jest* is pitiful. John Ferguson has a touch of epic grandeur about his religious mania. The device which sets the action of the little tragedy in motion—a mortgage held by a wicked landlord—is not a new one but it is treated with consummate skill.

The Ferguson family, in whose kitchen the four acts take place, is made up of strong natures. John Ferguson is an aged and Bible-reading invalid. He is a fanatic with redeeming qualities. He is

kindly by nature, a good husband, an affectionate and understanding father. If his brother does not send money from America at once, the Fergusons must leave their farm, where so many generations were born and have died. Yet when young Hannah petulantly complains of the lateness of the postman, just when they most want him to be early, John chides her: “Hannah, child! You don't know what trouble the man may have had. It might not be his fault the mail's late. Sometimes there's a storm at sea, and that keeps the boat back. Mebbe the train was delayed. Many's a thing might have happened. You shouldn't be blaming Sam, for what is mebbe not his fault.”

John has the faith that will move mountains. “It is the will of God,” and “In his favor is life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning,” are words often on his lips. When the letter from America does not come and young Hannah laments bitterly at the misfortune, her father answers: “Daughter, dear, you're a young slip of a girl, or you'd never talk that way. . . . There's meaning in it whatever happens. I can't see God's purpose, but I know well there is one. His hand never makes a mistake.”

Even to save the farm John Ferguson would not dream of urging Hannah into a wretched marriage. He would rather beg his bread from door to door. There is never a moment when his paternal tenderness could be challenged. The climax of his religious fanaticism comes when, after Henry Witherow, the wicked landlord, has ruined Hannah, John Ferguson stumbles out into the night to prevent a wrong being avenged by a murder and to warn Witherow that his life is in danger. Explaining his act to his wife he says: “God's Word says I must love



ROLLO PETERS AS "ANDREW FERGUSON" AND HENRY HERBERT AS "CLUTIE" JOHN MAGRATH IN *JOHN FERGUSON*

my enemies, Sarah. That is my guide in all I do. It's hard to obey that commandment, and when I was standing there in front of Witherow I was tempted to take hold of him and do him an injury . . . but I resisted the temptation, and I did what God bid me. I wasn't able to love him, but I warned him. I could do no more than that . . . but God 'll mebbe understand. . . . Man's been hitting back since the beginning of the world, but hitting back has learned no one anything but hatred and bitterness."

Only at the very end is this faith shaken—when his son Andrew confesses himself Witherow's murderer. Then the old man weakens. Andrew is the pride of his heart. He must not give himself up. He must hide, then get away to America. The money which arrived too late to prevent two tragedies may prevent a third. He even seeks, pathetically, to justify himself by religion. James Caesar had killed Henry Witherow "Many's a while in his mind." "Does not the

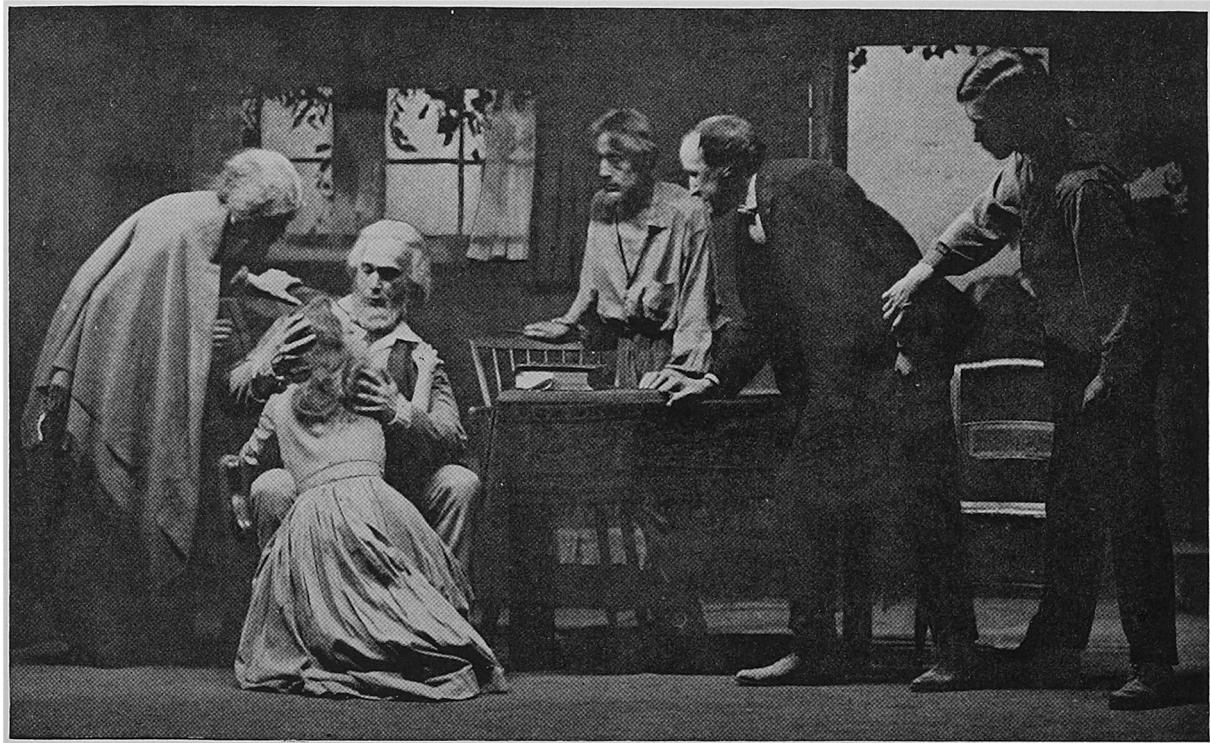
Bible say, 'If you think a sin you commit a sin!'" But the result of his teaching is turned cruelly against him at this crisis for both his children stand firm in the belief that Andrew must give himself up to justice.

Mrs. Ferguson is a simple, motherly soul. Handsome, full-blown Hannah is a headstrong, passionate girl, attracted perhaps in spite of herself, for a moment, by the masterful ways and imposing person of Witherow. But when he jokes coarsely about her beauty and mocks at her possible marriage with Caesar, the coward, she strikes him in the face and orders him from the house. Andrew, the son, is a sensitive, thoughtful boy. He had studied for the ministry, but his father's resources gave out before this could be accomplished. He has little but conscientious effort to bring to farm work. Such are the Fergusons.

James Caesar, the village grocer, is the most skillfully drawn character of the play. He has been repeatedly wronged by Witherow. But, although forced to stand by and see his people turned out of their home, he only brags of the revenge he will one day have upon his tormentor. His tongue is his only weapon. He is oily and cringing, and at heart a sensualist. Caesar will pay off the mortgage, he might even help Andrew to continue his studies for the ministry—he has often thought he would like to be related to a minister—if Hannah will listen to him. He is a confirmed egoist, quite willing to marry a woman against her will. "What does it matter to me whether she wants me or not, so long as I'm married to her?" he cries.

But when Hannah cannot endure his caresses, and sustained by her father goes to tell Witherow that the money will not be forthcoming, when the girl he loves has been the victim of bestial brutality, even then, Caesar does not dare to kill the oppressor, but runs shivering to hide himself.

In order to give his play a lyric element, Ervine introduced "Clutie" John, a beg-



Francis Bruguiere

HELEN WESTLEY AS "SARAH," HELEN FREEMAN AS "HANNAH," AUGUSTIN DUNCAN AS "JOHN FERGUSON," HENRY HERBERT AS "CLUTIE" JOHN MAGRATH DUDLEY DIGGES AS "JAMES CAESAR" AND ROLLO PETERS AS "ANDREW FERGUSON IN JOHN FERGUSON, PLAYED BY THE THEATRE GUILD AT THE GARRICK THEATRE, NEW YORK

gar, who as the people in the play describe him, is "away in the mind." This character, however, is made a vital force in the development of the story; for "Clutie" paints such a vivid picture of Caesar's uselessness as an avenger and of Witherow's blackness of heart, in disjointed but eloquent words, that Andrew seizes his gun and sets out to do the work himself. When the tragedy has been accomplished and Andrew has gone down to the jail with Hannah to give himself up to justice, thus releasing Caesar from the suspicion of having committed the murder, John Ferguson again turns to his Bible for consolation in supreme distress. The most accomplished piece of acting was Dudley Digges' James Caesar. For years Mr. Digges was a faithful and efficient stage manager. Occasionally he played a small part, but finally shook off the shackles of *mise en scène*. In *John Ferguson* he has justified his faith in his own acting abilities. Augustin Duncan plays the title role in the grand style,

reads his lines beautifully, is eloquent in repose and in sweeping gestures. Helen Freeman as Hannah, displays superb abandon, and carries off the most dramatic scene in the play—the narration of her interview with Witherow and its fatal consequences, with genuine tragic force. Rollo Peters not only plays Andrew with telling dramatic intensity, but is the designer of a setting in which every object counts in creating atmosphere. Gordon Burby as Henry Witherow plays his one scene with requisite brutality, while Henry Herbert's "Clutie" is an admirable bit of technical finesse. In Helen Westley's performance of Sarah Ferguson, traces of the shrewish old women she has been playing this season including the gypsy virago, mother of Masha, in *Redemption* are plainly visible. But Sarah Ferguson is no shrew. Ervine explicitly describes her as "pleasant and agreeable, even when her mind is harassed," and again "her mind is moulded in the kindliness of an Ulster woman."